

TORTOISE

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

If you're walking up The Mound alongside Princes St Gardens, just before you reach the railway, look down through the railings to your right. You'll discover a small memorial garden, hidden in a dark and gloomy hollow. You've probably passed this point many times but your gaze usually meanders upwards between the dramatic skyline of the Old Town and the Castle perched on its craggy throne. I always notice that sombre little garden however, because it reminds me of a cool spring day in the sixties and a tortoise called Hamish.

It was a Saturday and my father had taken my sister Kathryn and me into town to buy new shoes. I didn't enjoy these shopping expeditions because I knew I would inevitably end up with sensible brown lace ups and not the dainty pointed toe styles I coveted. Despite my pleas, the ghastly shoes were bought and I remember sulking as I lugged the offending purchase along Princes St. When we reached the entrance to the Gardens, my father told Kathryn and me to amuse ourselves while he went off to a bookshop. This wasn't cruel abandonment as it might be interpreted today because at that time children were given a greater degree of freedom and trust. My sister and I were delighted. Our father always spent ages choosing books, an inexplicably boring activity to us. We were warned not to talk to strangers and he would meet us in an hour back at the main gate. We had been promised afternoon tea at Mackie's on Princes Street, the highlight being that rarest of treats - Coca Cola.

Kathryn and I wandered down to the memorial garden, our secret, out of the way place where we thought nobody ever went. We dumped our packages on to a bench then played 'chaisie' for a while, after which we sat down again to get our breath back. Our solitude was soon disturbed by the appearance of three other children and I remember feeling unnerved as these intruders burst into the space. There was an older girl, who seemed very grown up but was probably only about twelve and two younger children, probably her siblings.

She was dressed in what looked like her mother's skirt as it almost reached her ankles and was fastened at the waist with a safety pin. Her jumper was ragged and rolled up at the front to accommodate something she was concealing from the other two. The younger girl had long straggly hair and was wearing a thin summer dress and plastic sandals without socks. Her brother, who could only have been three or four was crying and trying to push in front of her. Without warning, she grabbed him and threw him down on to the grass. He landed with a thud and began to howl even more loudly. This prompted the older girl to smack her sister hard across the head.

'Don't you hit me Shelley! You bloody bastard!' she screamed.

'Don't you swear at me or you'll get fucking battered!' threatened Shelley.

I'd heard words like that before – from drunk men outside Jock's Lodge pub but I felt my sister stiffen as she shuffled up beside me. I knew we ought to leave but instead, we sat mesmerised as the scene unfolded.

The boy got up, wiped his face with his sleeve and pulled at Shelley's sleeve.

'Let me see it, I want to see it! I'll tell Mam if you don't let me see it!'

'And I'll tell her you hit me!' added the younger girl.

'Shut up!' replied Shelley. 'Both of you shut up! You'll see nothin unless ye both bloody shut up!'

The two fell silent as Shelley slowly produced a large tortoise from beneath her jumper.

‘Don’t you do nothing to mak it feart,’ instructed Shelley as she carefully placed the creature down on the grass.

I thought the tortoise must be dead. It was motionless, like lump of rock with its head, legs and tail retracted deep inside its shell and its underside pulled up like a drawbridge. It was almost indistinguishable from the other stones nestling in the long grass. The children crouched down quietly staring at their immobile pet.

‘When’s it gonna to come oot Shelley? When can I see it?’ asked the boy tapping its shell with a stick.

‘Leave it! Just shut up and wait!’ was the reply.

At this point Kathryn’s curiosity relinquished any previous unease and she stood up to get a better view.

Shelley caught sight of her.

‘Hey Yous girls - want to come and see the tortoise?’

The two younger children turned round, looked us up and down and sniggered, making me suddenly aware of our smart kilts and matching blazers. My sister, more adventurous than me nodded and made her way over. I followed tentatively – preferring we’d remained invisible. I pulled Kathryn back to a comfortable distance and we stood gazing at the tortoise.

‘What do you call it?’ I asked, trying to make conversation.

‘Hamish,’ whispered the younger girl. ‘Ye have to be quiet and he’ll come oot his shell.’

For ages, nothing seemed to happen until inch by inch a small, wrinkled head began to poke hesitantly out of the shell. The tortoise blinked, his black beady eyes unaccustomed to daylight. Almost simultaneously its claws appeared and then four leathery legs curled out onto the ground, heaving the creature upwards as it began to take slow and decisive steps.

The boy squealed excitedly and lunged towards the tortoise which in a flash, retreated back into its shell. The squabbling began again and this time it was Shelley who shook her brother and shoved him back down onto the grass. He got up shouting and sobbing and ran out of the garden. The two girls went after him, quite forgetting Hamish who was by now plodding purposefully across the grass into the shelter of the flower beds.

My sister and I, afraid of getting further involved in the fracas retreated back to our bench. We sat and waited for the children to return. By now, Hamish had discovered a clump of pansies on which he was contentedly gorging himself. He was in no hurry to escape. We waited and waited.

A lady came along and sat on a bench facing us. She was wearing a red hat and was accompanied by a white poodle with a diamond studded collar and lead. Its coat was cut in the shape of a lion with a fluffy front and a big pom-pom on the end of its tail. She had just begun to look at a magazine when the dog, having noticed the tortoise, started sniffing and pulling on its lead. The lady looked up and seeing Hamish who was now feasting on a patch of nasturtiums, called over to us.

‘You girls over there – is that your tortoise? You can’t let it eat the flowers like that.’

I went over and picked Hamish up and tried to explain the whole story and how we were waiting for the owners to return. I don’t think she believed me. I called Kathryn over, hoping she would back me up but all she did was crouch down and stroke the poodle. Hamish was heavy and struggling in my hands and his legs were clawing desperately in the air.

‘I think you’d better go find those children and give them back their tortoise,’ she said quite sternly.

I handed Hamish to my sister and we grabbed our bags and hurriedly left the memorial garden. We climbed up the hill to the main gate where my father was already waiting. He was rather annoyed – especially when he saw what my sister was carrying. I repeated the story of why we had the tortoise and was told to go and look for the children who were his owners. I wandered back down the steps. I know I didn’t look very hard but there was no sign of them anywhere and I was coming round to the idea that we had saved the Hamish from imminent danger and should take him home.

It took a long time to persuade my father that this was a good idea and only after Kathryn started to cry because she thought Hamish would just get lost in Princes St Gardens, did he relent. My father warned there would be no outing to Mackie’s now as you couldn’t take a tortoise into a restaurant but this was no deterrent. I even offered to wear my horrible new shoes home so that Hamish could safely travel home on the bus in the empty box.

And so Hamish the tortoise came to live in our back garden for a number of years. He had a charmed life strolling about and constantly feeding on my Mother’s marigolds and lettuces. His shell was rubbed with olive oil and as tortoises go he was quite shiny and dashing. He also became quite friendly and liked to be stroked under his chin. Each winter, Hamish hibernated in a cupboard in the original shoe box filled with straw until one spring he didn’t wake up at all and we had to bury him in a little plot beside the shed.

Lynn Gee returned to live in Edinburgh in 2016 after an absence of more than fifty years. She finds much about the city remains unchanged and memories of her childhood are often unearthed. She has had a career in education, raised a family, lived in a few different places and since retiring has been able to focus on her writing.